

Asian *Asian* Neighborhood *Neighborhood* Design *Design*



Asian Neighborhood Design is one of the oldest and most complex organizations in The Roberts Enterprise Development Fund portfolio. In 1973 AND had its genesis in a movement of Asian American architecture, design and urban plan-

ning students at the University of California at Berkeley who wanted to raise the housing standards in poor Asian American enclaves. Over the years AND has evolved to encompass political activism, architecture, custom millwork, furniture design for low-income immigrants, and

carpentry and cabinetry training programs for people with barriers to regular employment. In this last endeavor AND has partnered with REDF to expand training opportunities and increase its cabinet making business.

Following is a cross-section of the men and women of AND:

Maurice Lim Miller

Maurice Lim Miller's father, who was Chinese, and mother, who was Mexican, crossed the Mexican border so that he could be born a United States citizen. They returned to Mexico, where, by the time Lim Miller was



two, the parents had split up. Hoping for a better life, Lim Miller's mother moved him and his older half-sister to Northern California in 1955. "My mother had two kids and \$300 to her name when we arrived on a Greyhound bus," said Lim Miller, 52. "She had a Mexican third-grade education but she managed to learn bookkeeping on her own."

As Lim Miller's mother struggled to support the family, they moved from city to city between San Jose and Sacramento. His sister left school when she got pregnant and had her

first child at 17. "My mother made up her mind that I was going to be the one to go to college and get us out of poverty," he said. "She told me I had a choice: doctor or engineer. We weren't sure what engineers did but we knew they made money. When you're poor, you don't know about a lot of jobs."

Even though he hated engineering, Lim Miller toughed it out in the engineering program at the University of California at Berkeley. He worked briefly as an engineer for Union Carbide before being drafted and sent to Vietnam. In the States, he'd tried to connect with his native culture but because he looks more Asian than Latino, he was never really accepted in Mexican American communities. While serving in Vietnam, he found himself in the uncomfortable position of being "the good Asian" among troops that generally "considered Asians subhuman."

"Being in Vietnam politicized me about being Asian," he said. "I was pissed off all the time having to defend myself as an Asian."

When Lim Miller returned from service, he got involved in political activism in Chinatown. Before long, he was working with AND as the first instructor in the nonprofit's carpentry program.

"I was working primarily with Asian gang kids," he said. "I liked it that AND had a technical side and a social mission. The idea of taking some tangible skill and applying that to have some greater social impact was exciting."

In the 20 years that he's been with AND, Lim Miller has risen to become executive director of the organization. In January 1999, he was invited to sit with Hillary Rodham Clinton during the State of the Union Address where he and the rest of the nation heard President Clinton praise AND as a model of economic opportunity and multicultural cooperation.

Despite these lofty heights, poverty and its legacy are still close enough for Lim Miller to touch. Members of his extended family, still struggling with poverty, at times have lived with Miller and his wife and kids. At various periods, his sister's children have been on public assistance. And his mother, ground down by years of doing without, committed suicide.

"My mother always used to ask herself, 'Why aren't I rich?'" he said. "My family and my own experiences have shown me how important it is to know what opportunities

are out there. At AND, we never expect to do everything in people's lives but we do want them to see what is possible."

Kevin Johnson

Kevin Johnson, 29, is one of 15 trainees in AND's four-month carpentry, cabinetry and construction program in San Francisco. For several weeks, his group has been doing finishing work on two Habitat for Humanity houses being built in the Mission District. He judges the program by the number of promises kept. Tim Chupein, the site manager, got him overalls and boots. He took Johnson down to Pleasanton and got him into a carpenter's apprentice class required by the union. This afternoon, Chupein is going to take him to Home Depot to get his tools.

"I'm a real skeptical person," Johnson said. "A lot of programs don't deliver when they say they will. Tim is real straight up. Everything they said they'd do, they did and they did it on time. And they expect you to be straight up. Tim looks you in the eye and tells you they don't take no mess. I liked him from the first day I met him – he talked from the heart."

Before his caseworker sent him to AND to talk to Chupein, Johnson didn't know what he was going to do with his life. "I was just floating around being bad," he said. "I wasn't really looking for no job."

Johnson, who has two small sons by different mothers, had tried living legally – he'd worked as a security guard and as a driver for a carpet company. But those jobs didn't pay much and he found them boring.

A former member of the Crips, he'd also tried living illegally. "I've done just about everything except child molesting, rape, murder and stealing cars," he said. "Doing bad was as natural to me as washing my hands before dinner – it was always in my face. I got tired of hurting people – especially myself. There's always that good part inside of you that's fighting for a chance."

From previous work experience, he has 700 hours registered in a little union book he

carries in his pocket. He already knew a bit about rough framing but he's developing a new range of skills at AND. "I can look at that wall and tell you everything inside it and how it got there," he said. "I can build this room. I can build this desk." When he leaves the program in another month, he will be able to go to the union hall and get jobs in the \$13 to \$14 an hour range. If he continues to upgrade his skills, in a couple years he will be able to command \$36 an hour as a master carpenter.

One day he wants to build a home for his sons. "Can't many guys go out and get some land and build their own house," he said. "I can tell them, 'This didn't come from a real estate office. This came from your daddy's sweat.'"

Gilbert Chan

Gilbert Chan, 46, presided over AND's one foray into for-profit enterprise. In 1981 AND spun-off an architecture, construction and development company called Urban Design.

Chan, who is also considered house historian because he has been with AND almost since its beginning, says most people don't like to talk about Urban Design.

"There's a stigma that it was a big failure," he said with a wry smile. "But to be honest, it was wildly successful."

Between 1981 and 1986, Urban Design was rated one of the fastest growing companies in Northern California. By 1988, it had a staff of 70 and \$12 million of contracts spanning from Petaluma to Half Moon Bay.

"The idea of taking some tangible skill and applying that to have some greater social impact was exciting."

Then, in 1989, the real estate market crashed and took down Urban Design and just about every other small architecture company in the Bay Area.

"We had 12 projects in various stages of construction," he said. "All highly leveraged

deals. We couldn't sell them and we couldn't support the debt. Everything we learned then is reflected in the way we operate today."

When Chan returned to AND to run finances and operations, he was shocked by how disorganized the nonprofit's accounting and record keeping were. When he asked to see the receipts, he was given a handful of slips of paper. No one knew how to do a proper cash flow projection. The average receivable was five months old.

Chan said AND won't try to spin off Specialty Mill Products, its custom cabinetry division, because of the hard lessons gleaned from Urban Design's fate.

"We learned that once you spin it off, you create a different set of problems, goals and missions," he said.

Being involved with REDF has pulled AND further along on the path to financial sophistication. George Roberts, who put up \$1 million for AND to set up a cabinet making shop and training program in West Oakland, attached a big string to the money.

Roberts was willing to give AND half of what they needed for the expansion if the agency was willing to take out a \$1 million bank loan for the rest. Chan said he felt Roberts' offer moved the nonprofit to the next level of fiscal maturity: now that AND has to meet its commitment to the bank, there is greater pressure for the business to perform well.

"He said, you guys have got to learn how to run a business. You've got to be accountable. The only way you are going to learn fiscal responsibility is if you take out this loan."

Chan believes that ultimately the pressure to become more fiscally responsible will bolster AND's social mission.



"It's been a gradual and painful change for us," he said. "You have to have accounting systems and you have to have a chain of command. You've got to think this way if the mission of your business is to generate jobs and generate money to put back into the training."

David Meiland and Latricia Andrews

David Meiland, 36, is site manager for the 65,000-square foot cabinetry shop and training program AND opened in a depressed West Oakland neighborhood in 1996. One of the most challenging parts of his job is getting funders to understand that just because a

person graduates from a four-month construction training program doesn't mean they are mentally ready to go to work.

"The way that results are measured really boggles me," Meiland said. "Funders want to see a direct line from training to job. That's not the way most human beings work."

Many of the people who come through AND's program come from families with multigenerational histories of public assistance. Meiland said that sometimes a single four-month program is not enough to transform the way someone sees his life.

"We don't get any credit for making incremental changes in people's lives that may pay off somewhere down the road," he said. "But I really do believe that for most people, in a few years the time they've spent at AND will matter, whether they start working right now or not."

Latricia Andrews, 25, is a cabinetmaker for the SMP production shop that takes up about half of the warehouse. Even among the

AND graduates who do go directly into jobs, Andrews is a star.

“I knew I wanted to make a change for me and my two kids,” said Andrews, who is the mother of a four-year-old and a seven-year-old. Her family had been living on public assistance; she’d occasionally braid hair for a little extra money. Her neighbor Jennifer Jacobs, the office manager for AND Oakland, told her about the training program. “I’d never been in a work environment before.”

At first, Andrews didn’t like the training. “I’m a lady,” she said laughing. “I didn’t want to break my nails carrying heavy things. But I got better and better at it. I started to look forward to getting up in the morning and coming in. And when we got to general construction, I loved that.”

Andrews did so well that when she graduated she was offered a staff job with SMP. She is in charge of the locker department. The company has several contracts to make gym

lockers for health clubs. She is also a trainer for AND.

“The trainees spend their third week with me,” she said. “I teach them how to put hardware on, how to hang doors, how to assemble lockers. I teach them everything I can get into them in that week.”

She likes being able to work so close to home and she gets along with her coworkers. And she’s gotten used to the wear and tear on her looks.

“You can’t come here with your hair pretty and your nails long. You’re going to get dirty. But it’s fun. Every day I may learn something different. I’m always proud of what I do. When I go to gyms, I tell people, I made those lockers on my job.”

Andrews makes \$10 an hour. Earning a paycheck has done more than help her put food on the table. “Working has changed the way I see my life,” she said smiling. “Now, I want to try so many things.”